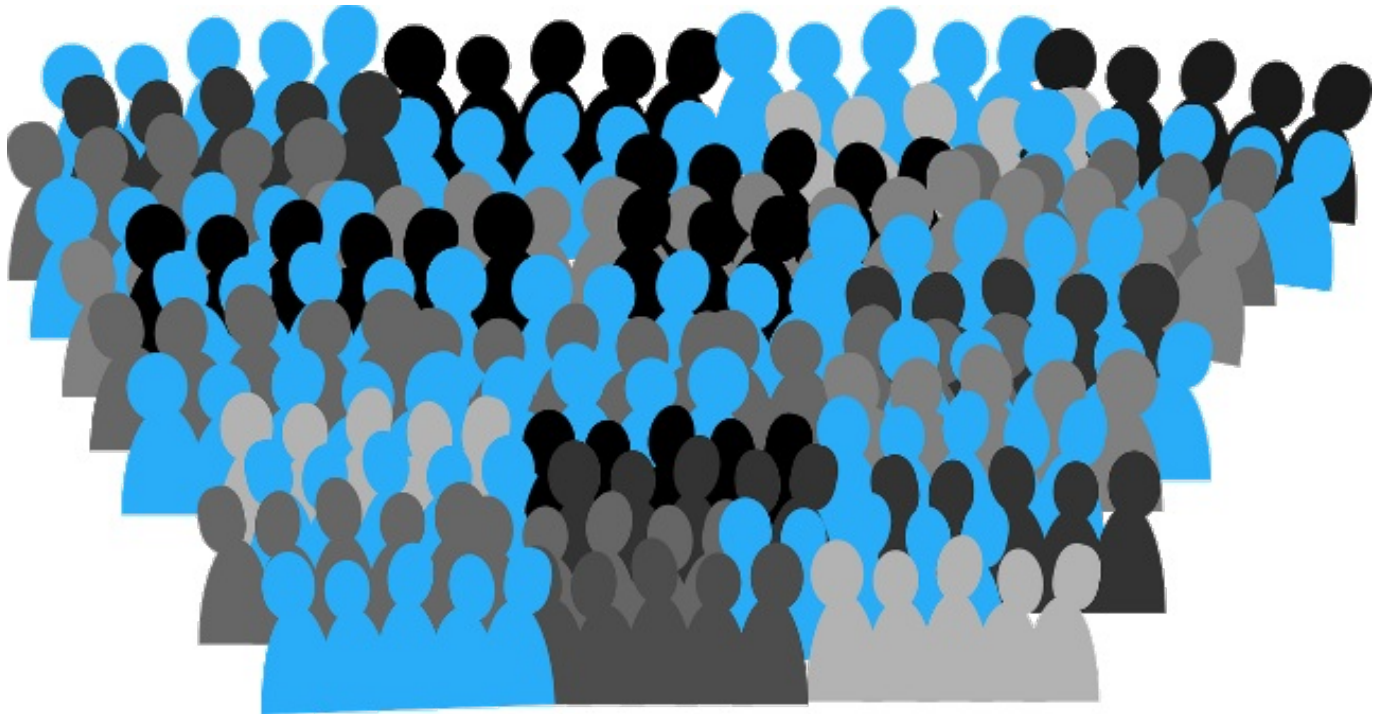


# Navigating Islamic-Democratic Politics



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With the most prominent supposed examples of 'Islamic' governance often pointed to as Saudi Arabia, Iran and now ISIS, you'd be forgiven for concluding that the question of whether Islamic rule can be reconciled with democratic governance had been made rather redundant. Even the various examples of Muslim countries that are democratic, from Turkey to Senegal, Indonesia to Albania, are either constantly wrestling with resurgent autocracy or secularized political entities not unlike their Western 'Christian' counterparts.

But the question remains relevant to the political struggles of the Muslim world that are far from coming to any kind of conclusion. This essay does not hope to add to the plethora of literature on the *compatibility* of the faith and political systems, but rather aims to explore the areas of divergence between Western and Islamic traditions of the exercise of power.

It may often be said that Islam allows for democratic rule with certain 'caveats'; I would argue that, rather than being *restraints*, these differences are instead alternative points of view that could well further enrich our understanding in the West of the shortcomings of our political systems and how we may improve them.

Fundamental differences exist. Some of these provide some serious food for thought for Western politicians, whilst others apply themselves very specifically in the domain of the religious, predicated on certain beliefs and difficult to apply to secular societies. Below is a brief discussion of the former; the issue of personality politics, separation of powers and popular versus technocratic governance.

## Personality Politics

One of the key issues that is resurging in European democracy today is the ever-present issue of populism; appealing

to masses equipped with less than perfect knowledge to further one's political appeal. The problem is when this process comes at the expense of well-reasoned policy making, as it quite often does. Herein Islamic tradition inserts itself in various ways to contribute to the debate between direct and indirect democracy.

Islamic scholars have debated even the legitimacy of one nominating themselves for leadership at all. This revolves around the idea that the search for a leader would ideally find someone reluctant to take up the opportunity as s/he understands its immense responsibility. Such a yearning finds its place in almost every *philosophical* tradition, but is often pragmatically omitted from corresponding *political* traditions, and this ought to be revisited.

On similar lines Plato bemoaned the rise of the *rhetorician* that democracy would entail. Even now, political scientists haven't quite figured out whether electorates decide based mostly on policy and competence, or whether or not you would 'sit down for a beer' with that person, as is said across the pond in the US. Being the best speaker or networker does not necessarily entail practise of the same skills required for effective governance. Islam's objections to self-promotion and personality-driven politics may help punctuate concern over the shift of countries like Britain recently towards televised Prime Ministerial debates. The example of the Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960s US is telling; those who tuned in on the radio felt Nixon had the edge, but television viewers saw sweat beads form on Nixon's upper lip as he came under pressure and inclined in Kennedy's favour; substance doesn't always prevail.

Technocratic selection processes are controversial; they can easily veer towards self-preservation. However, perhaps we ought to be more conscientious in pursuing a middle ground between populism versus policy-based selection processes that force personality to take a second tier role.

## Separation of Powers

Islam also contains a fascinating parallel of the Western concept of separation of powers. Scholarly works often contain unambiguously strong statements warning religious scholars and those of knowledge to keep their distance from rulers, and advice to the people to beware those speakers who frequent the palaces of tyrants. This very successfully imbibed a culture of separation in Islamic society that ensured a robust and independent religious and civil society was always on hand to counteract the excesses of executive power. This meant that even when the aforementioned checks on executive power failed, as they so often did; wider society was not fundamentally affected. In other words, this was an unmoving bulwark against autocratic rule morphing into something worse; totalitarian and fascist government. This can be seen in the Abbasid era, often referred to as Islam's "Golden Age", when light-touch autocrats presided over relatively free and intellectually progressive societies. The freedom of community affairs were largely protected as the affairs of religion, law and state were separated by both religious teaching and the political tradition it led to.

As we have seen sophisticated societies succumb to this depth of dictatorship so recently, from Weimar Germany to Mussolini's Italy, this is surely a potent reminder. Its secular equivalent is the separation of the judiciary and the executive. Whilst this has formally been enshrined in Western democracy, there is a perception that those in positions of influence form a tightly knit network of elites. This close social arrangement threatens to undermine otherwise effective institutional separation; a greater emphasis on social as well as formal separation may serve us well.

## The Nature of Leadership

One of the greatest gripes of the global *commentariat* is today's lack of leadership. The idea that leaders are not just supposed to reflect and respond to public opinion, but are also supposed to lead it themselves as well, is a common refrain from both sides of the political spectrum. Whilst it is important to distinguish between *shaping* opinion, which can easily morph into self-serving propaganda, and *leading* it (with connotations of intellectual and moral purpose), this criticism of the modern era seems appropriate. We have left the post-war era of great ideas and the expansion of welfare and international law and entered instead a landscape of populism and small-mindedness.

This speaks to the great debate between direct and indirect democracy. Some European countries are moving towards more of the former, with more plebiscites and public consultations than closed-door committee meetings. This can arguably be seen as a response to the return of entrenched social elites in advanced societies. However, this would bind political leaders even closer to the popular mood. At times this mood may be considerably more progressive than government itself, but increasingly this may have the opposite effect of capturing public policy and undermining progressive political currents.

Here, Islam and other Eastern traditions like Confucianism diverge from Western thought in having a far greater respect for leadership and authority. This is one factor that allowed leaders in countries like South Korea and Japan to make the great leaps they did, using sacrifices by post-war generations to propel investment and long-term growth. This contrasts markedly with the short-termism that has overtaken the West, and I would argue this is in part due to the lack of cultural scope for true leadership today. Islam strikes a balance between giving each individual the right to petition and question leadership, whilst also emphasising the social value of 'obeying' (a word that doesn't come easy to the Western mind) authority in the interests of greater society, making a long-term government viewpoint more feasible. This is a thin line between cohesion and the *stability over freedom* misnomer. However, arguably the growing tepidness of Western leadership combined with direct popular democracy has brought about a culture of populist short-termism that is crippling our ability to deal with the greatest problems that face us today, from climate change to inequality to the proliferation of refugees. Our political and social culture deserves far greater scrutiny.

The information and views set out in this blog article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the LSE Undergraduate Political Review, nor the London School of Economics.

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